

Greek election may reopen can of worms

By: Hugo Dixon

The upcoming Greek election may reopen the can of worms that the country's recent 86 billion euro bailout deal with its creditors was supposed to close. Given that no party is likely to emerge from the September 20 vote with a majority, it may be hard to form a strong government that can implement the program. There's even a risk that there will be yet more elections, tipping Greece back into crisis.

When Alexis Tsipras triggered the election by resigning as prime minister, he probably thought he would win fairly easily. After all, July's opinion polls showed him head and shoulders above his opponents. Tsipras' idea was to get rid of the parliamentarians in his left-wing Syriza party who opposed his deal with the euro zone and secure a new mandate to implement the program.

But new opinion polls that came out last week paint a different picture. In all, Syriza is still the leading party. But its gap over the center-right New Democracy party has narrowed sharply.

What's more, Tsipras' own approval rating, which used to be sky high, has come down to earth. In a poll by the University of Macedonia, only 30 percent of those asked had a positive view of him, down from 70 percent in March.

In the past, Tsipras seemed like a Teflon prime minister, who remained popular despite terrible decisions that took the country to the edge of an economic abyss. But now it looks the mud is beginning to stick.

■ The civil war

The civil war inside Syriza is also taking its toll. One hard-left faction, which wants to bring back the drachma and is furious that Tsipras agreed a deal with the euro zone despite previously saying he wouldn't, has already created a new party.

The election campaign has barely started and opinion polls during the August holiday season are not considered particularly reliable. Despite those caveats, it doesn't look likely that any party will emerge with a majority in the 300-seat parliament even after taking account of the fact that the one with the most votes gets an extra 50 members of parliament.

This presents a problem. True, the vast majority of MPs elected next month are likely to belong to parties that are committed at least in theory to the bailout. The snag is that Tsipras has said he won't be prime minister of a government including New Democracy or two smaller centrist and center-left parties. What's more, it is touch and go whether his favorite coalition partner, the far-right Independent Greeks, will secure any MPs at all.



If Tsipras can't form a government, there may have to be yet more elections, the third this year. This could cause further economic mayhem because Athens would fall seriously behind in implementing its bailout deal. People might even speculate again that Greece could leave the euro.

The Greek people might well punish Tsipras if he forced a third election. They already seem unhappy that a second ballot has been called – not to mention that Tsipras held a referendum in July on an earlier version of the bailout program. Given that, Tsipras might yet form a coalition with the center and center-left parties he has pledged not to deal with. The former prime minister does, after all, have a track record of going back on his word.

■ New splinter groups

Such an outcome might lead to an effective implementation of the bailout. But there is a risk that Tsipras won't get rid of all the rebels from his party because he is afraid of swelling the ranks of the new splinter group. In that case, he could find his government starts with a majority,

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but that its unity melts away when it has to take tough decisions, again triggering elections.

This scenario might be avoided if any party invited to join a Tsipras-led coalition insisted on all the other centrist parties being in the government too. This would probably give it a big enough majority to withstand future defections. Any putative coalition partner should also insist that Tsipras appoints serious ministers including some technocrats to his cabinet. His first government was plagued with incompetence.

Another idea is that Tsipras could support some form of national unity government but not as its prime minister. He could propose another Syriza politician or some technocrat for the post. But this would raise the concern that Tsipras wants to wash his hands of the program he previously signed up to, which in turn would make it hard to implement.

All these calculations would, of course, change if New Democracy wins the election. It would find it easier to form a coalition because it has promised to work with any democratic party after the vote. It has even said it would work with Syriza in what would be a national unity government. While that, indeed, might be the best outcome for Greece, Tsipras is most unlikely to agree to it. Even if the worst scenarios are avoided, the risk is that amid the political fighting, what's most beneficial for the Greek people does not end up driving events forward.

(Source: Reuters)

FEATURE

The Donald tries out for the team

By: Wesley Pruden

Now even Donald Trump is taking himself seriously. He's trying now to be colorful without being reckless, careful not to be rude when he doesn't have to be, and playing less the showboat and more like someone trying out for the team.

He's still Donald Trump, and he hasn't been to the barber shop. He can't put a leash on his arrogance, and he still can't resist taking cruel (and telling) shots at Jeb Bush, but the Jeb is a shrinking target. Throwing darts at him is becoming an indulgence.

The Donald signed the loyalty oath Thursday demanded by Reince Priebus, the chairman of the party, promising not to run as a third-party candidate if he doesn't get the Republican nomination.

"I just wanted fairness from the Republican Party," he said Thursday. "I will be totally pledging my allegiance to the Republican Party and the conservative principles for which it stands."

Such a decision was a no-brainer. If he had declined it would have spoken volumes about how he, as a front-runner rendering the other candidates as mutts chasing the meat wagon, in his gut measures his chances in Iowa and New Hampshire. Besides, Mr. Priebus and the rest of the Republican establishment can't do anything about it if the Donald comes upon a burning bush by the side of the road later and changes his mind. He would offend only the establishment and the party's prospects in the election, but not his considerable ego.

■ Front-runner

Now that he's the runaway front-runner he has to act like one. Success is the curse of insurgents. The successful insurgent has to remember "who bring him to the dance," and he can't run against himself, tempting as it may be to try.

Two new public-opinion polls show just how successful the improbable Mr. Trump continues to be.

Trump is a veteran of conflict with construction unions, banks, investors and government bureaucrats who think it's their job to stand in the way of anyone trying to get something done.

One of them, a survey by Monmouth University of New Jersey, finds him polling nationally 30 percent, up 4 points, and leading in every ideological category. He's the choice of the Tea Party, of the "very" conservative, of the "somewhat" conservative, of liberals, men, women, young people and old people. It's a remarkable performance.

Every more remarkable, the runner-up, though distant at 18 percent, is Ben Carson, another outsider gaining on everyone. The message to the party

regulars, who measure every word and whose milk-toast message is "vote Republican, we're not as bad as you think."

It's hard to get anyone to throw his hat in the air over that, when many of the people in the weeds, the jonson grass and grass-roots think establishment Republicans are indeed just "as bad as you think." These voters think the party won the lottery in 2012 and 2014 on their nickel, and they're in a rage over the theft.

The insurgents are telling the Republican establishment, loud and clear: "You stink, so get out of the way."

The collapse of Jeb Bush tells this story in full, plain and blunt and with neither tact nor tenderness.

The onetime governor of Florida promised that he would mount a "different kind of campaign." He would be the happy warrior (apparently no one reminded him of what happened to Al Smith, the original happy warrior).

■ Public opinion

He had never liked the grit and grime of take-no-prisoners politics, anyway, and he just wouldn't be part of that. He's down to the single digits in the public-opinion polls, far from the sound of the guns, safe from grit and grime. Civility is nice, but not this year.

Grit and grime is the natural home of Donald Trump, who boasts of his prowess at the "art of the deal."

He's a veteran of conflict with construction unions, banks, investors and government bureaucrats who think it's their job to stand in the way of anyone trying to get something done.

Bluster is more effective than bonhomie in these wars, and to the astonishment of everyone — and to the terror of the regulars — this year it works in politics, too.

Ben Carson has the surgeon's assurance that he's got the answers and everyone should give him room. (Operating room nurses joke that "the difference between God and a surgeon is that God doesn't think he's a surgeon.") Mr. Carson is selling the same elixir the Donald is peddling, with just a touch more sugar to make it go down, and his elixir is beginning to fly off the shelves in his shop, too.

It's still difficult to see how either the Donald or the doctor can get the delegates to actually win the nomination, and actual delegates, not polling numbers, is what the race is all about. But nothing seems beyond imagination this year, when the establishment in both parties is taking a licking. This is what makes politics the most entertaining game in town.

(Source: The Washington Times)

Corbyn's rise is a symptom of the Left's slow drift into irrelevance

By: William Hague

In late 1997, having rather rashly taken on the job of Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition, I discussed with the new prime minister, Tony Blair, which of us had the most difficult job. "You have," he said, without a moment's doubt.

Although he is despised in Labour's current leadership election, Blair was a Tory leader's worst nightmare: appealing to the swing voter and reassuring to the Right-leaning, it was hard to find a square on the political chessboard on which he did not already sit. When people told me I did well at Prime Minister's Questions, I knew I had to, since I had very little else going for me at all — I had to raise the morale of Conservatives each Wednesday to get them through the frustration and impotence of every other day of the week.

Blair courted business leaders and Right-wing newspapers, often to great effect. He was a Labour leader who loved being thought to be a secret Tory, a pro-European who was fanatical in support for the United States, a big spender who kept income taxes down, an Anglican who let it be known he wanted to be a Catholic and regularly read the Quran. He could be tough or soft or determined or flexible as necessary and shed tears if needed, seemingly at will. To the political law that you can't fool all of the people all of the time he added Blair's law — that you can make a very serious attempt at it.

This was the human election-winning machine against which some of us dashed ourselves, making the Charge of the Light Brigade look like a promising maneuver by comparison. Yet now, only eight years after he left the scene he dominated, his party's election is conducted with scorn for the most successful leader they ever had.

■ The first reason

The first reason for this is the truly extraordinary rule allowing huge numbers of people to join up for the specific purpose of selecting the new leader. If there was an NVQ Level 1 in How To Run a Party, the crucial nature of the qualifying period to vote in a leadership election would be on the syllabus, possibly on the first page. Every student plotting to take over a university society knows that the



shorter that period, the easier it is to mount an insurgency from outside. But this basic fact seems to have escaped Ed Miliband, along with every other possible consideration of what might happen after his own unnecessarily rapid departure.

The result of this is that Labour's leader is being chosen by a largely new electorate, with correspondingly little sense of ownership of the party's history, in which the desire to align the party with their own views outweighs any sense of duty to provide the country with an alternative government.

The second reason is the weakness of the mainstream candidates to an extent unprecedented in any election in a major party in British parliamentary history. Even in 1935, an even darker time for the Labour Party when it had far fewer MPs than today, the leadership election was between Clement Attlee and Herbert Morrison: great names that are etched into our history.

This is the first election of a Labour leader in which none of the candidates look like they could be prime minister five years later.

This weakness partly explains the third and most significant factor in what appears to be, in the form of Corbynmania, a sharp move to the pre-Blair, old-fashioned, Michael Foot-was-a-moderate, Seventies Left, which is that none of them has been able to articulate what a social democratic, center-Left party should stand for in the first half of the 21st century.

Blair's ability to win elections was not accompanied by a coherent philosophy. The seminars he held with Schroeder's German SPD and Clinton Democrats

on the "Third Way", the ultimate attempt at government by triangulation, collapsed in ridicule. And the question neither Labour's candidates nor their socialist colleagues abroad can now answer is — in a century in which markets dominate, more power passes to consumers, technology gives more choice by the day to individuals, working lives are more flexible than ever, and class-based voting is dying out, what is the role and purpose of the moderate Left?

■ Democratic case

You can scan in vain the speeches of Yvette Cooper, Liz Kendall and Andy Burnham for a clear answer to this question, although I do not necessarily recommend it unless you find it hard to sleep. You might think there is a modern social democratic case to be made that some people — the less educated, unskilled, and immobile — could miss out on the benefits of the information revolution and that changing that is a new purpose of the center-Left. Instead, in Britain and across Europe, it is left to fringe parties to prey on those dissatisfied with the vast and rapid changes in modern society.

And most revealing of all, those same speeches (yes, I really have read them), point to no model abroad of the Left in power, no hero to be admired or policy to be emulated. The main parties of the Left have turned into partners of conservatives in Germany, reformist liberals in Italy, back-pedaling socialists in France, catastrophes in Latin America, and been annihilated by extremists in Greece. There is still a Socialist International, but there is no longer a common ideology to underpin it.

Seen in this context, the agony of Labour's leadership election is easier to understand. This is a tribe lost in a desert with no star to follow, and no inspirational leader to point to a new one. Across the world, parties that thrived on the socialist ideals of an industrializing society are losing their relevance, and what we are witnessing is a symptom and dramatic demonstration of that fact.

Faced with that awful reality, Labour is turning to something, anything that seems authentic, passionate, and consistent. The failure, in Britain and abroad, to find the social democratic version of that is a failure of historic proportions.

(Source: The Telegraph)